

The fate of paradox in the separation of philosophical and political thought

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Abstract

This paper begins with an analysis of Alain Badiou's (2010) interpretation of an encounter between Socrates and Calicles, as recounted in Plato's dialogue *Gorgias*. The intention is to explore how the conflict between these two men might suggest new ways of theorizing 'the situation of the student' in a teacher-student interaction. Badiou identifies this interaction as producing a conflict for reason of there being incommensurability between the kinds of thinking that each man employs. Proceeding from this point, it could be understood that a teacher-student interaction that requires abstract thinking, on account of its educational nature, could also be thought of as an interaction that would have to be characterised by its incommensurability. If such incommensurability makes the situation of the student, by definition, a philosophical situation, as Badiou would understand it to be, then there is no other way to negotiate a pathway towards a common understanding than through philosophical thought. But what if the philosophical nature of this discussion is overwhelmed by the teacher's political imperative to finish the discussion, to change the topic, to diminish the value of the student's understanding of truth? In crude terms, this question might leave us with the vivid impression of the incommensurable collapsing into the commensurable, and the paradox that connects learning with the unknown disappearing from its legitimate place, that where it cannot be seen. In addressing this problem, the intention is investigate the role education plays when interpreted as work, in inhibiting the interaction of the student with paradox and hence his or her formation of their political subjectivity. Engagement with this question will draw on the thinking of Hannah Arendt (1998) with the intention of elucidating the nature of the ironic space that paradox must continue to occupy despite the denial expressed when education is interpreted as work.

In the absence of philosophy

By 'thought' I mean the subject insofar as it is constituted through a process that cuts through the totality of established knowledge. Or, as Lacan puts it, the subject insofar as it makes a hole in knowledge. (Badiou, 2010, p. 26)

An investigation of the state of reason – of the manner in which reason is influential in our interaction with ourselves, others and the world – is an enquiry that could be begun at any moment in any situation. Such an enquiry could involve engaging with something as simple as a term that we poorly understand, or it could be an experience that speaks of something other than what we might think it represents. It could even be a lone gesture in the form of an action that reveals a disturbing fact in a narrative that might have previously gone unquestioned. An investigation into the state of reason, in terms of the role it plays in education, could be initiated from such a viewpoint, as it could be initiated in response to a profane experience that, while ignored because of its profanity, could ironically speak to the truth of a more formal problem. We wouldn't have to be philosophers of language, phenomenologists, neo-positivists, neo-Marxists to qualify ourselves for such an enquiry; in fact, it might be recommended that we shouldn't be – that it sometimes falls on us to think for ourselves and to take on the most formal of problem in the most informal context or, better said, one might say, in a context where the relationship is unrecognisable. It merely needs to begin with an impetus to respond to the idea that such a term, such an experience, such a gesture bears an organic relation to a wider and deeper significance, and that we intuit this expression to be a reflection of a self-contradictory whole which, if we were to enquire further, would appear to disturb our historical understanding of what this term, experience or gesture actually referred to.

Before I begin, I want to share an anecdote. I am listening to an interview on the radio. The interview is nearly over. There is the sensation that there is still some time to fill and something needs to be said before the interviewer can flick the switch and take them off the air. In this moment of needing to pass the time, the interviewer asks her subject, a man in his retirement:

In what moment during your life have you been the happiest?

Without hesitation and with total certainty, he responded: During the war [the Second World War]!

Why was that?

Because everybody knew what they had to do! Everybody had a purpose.¹

Perhaps because I was named after an airman who died during this war², perhaps because I equated war with horror, perhaps because I had grown up conscious that we now live in times like these as a consequence of the sacrifice of others who were committed to intervening in this international event, perhaps because I had seen buildings in Poland in the early 1980s that has been fenced off since their destruction during the 1940s and had not been touched since in a city that had been

¹ This is not the actual transcript but how I remember the conversation. I do not even remember the identity of the interviewee and yet neither of these facts would seem important, that is if we can imagine the possibility of such a conversation.

² Richard Edward Isaacs (1923-1943).

largely destroyed³, perhaps because I had walked through fields in the same country on the most beautiful summer's day and, in almost the same instant, just when it was possible to say that I couldn't have been happier, I had what you might be wonton to call a hallucination and saw a German machinegun nest positioned under an oak at about 60 meters, the soldiers' eyes lost in a menacingly dark shadow made by the rim of their helmets (or maybe their eyes were just lost), their gun trained for work. I don't know! I am confused by my own reaction. Nobody is denying the possibilities that happiness can be experienced during a war; we know nothing of the interviewee's happiness in terms of what his role was and how this role made possible the sensation of such satisfaction through fulfilment of a purpose. What is alarming is the naturalness with which he responds to the question; he speaks as if it were only logical that we should feel the same as he did.

Why am I reflecting on this anecdote in function of how it might speak to the topic of this paper? It would be absurd to think of war as being some kind of metaphor for education (even if on another level war itself is clearly an education) and, as such, I am not drawing a relationship between the functions of these adventures and the nature of the events that these adventures can involve. Rather, what I wish to allude to is the allegorical value that could be appropriated to the interviewee's concept of purpose and role with respect to how we might theorize the student's understanding of what sort of experience their education should comprise. Clearly, the soldier's explanation of his participation in the Second World War is simplistic; it ignores what must have been a bare fact: the unknown as implying the proximity of mortal danger and for some certain death. It is not called the theatre of war for nothing. He survived. He came home. The paradox is that while it was his fate that he should survive and furthermore have good memories of his experience: someone else died fighting, as it were, alongside him. Evidently, there was little measure in his thoughts of the proximity of fatal danger; an important point when we come to examine our simplistic notion of the purpose of education.

A significant aspect of my initial horror on hearing the final words of the previously referred to interview has to do with the idea of war could being conceived of in such simple terms, that it could be referred to as an experience without the presence of what, to me, actually defines what it is; that is a battle for which the outcome cannot be known because this is what a battle is, which in terms of war supposes nothing less than a loss of lives, life changing injuries, destruction, events that cannot be replayed; the mortal event. Whatever his reason for describing such an experience in the way that he did, we see how easy it can be to collapse the most complex of experiences into the simplest of expressions and in so doing achieving the simplest idea of what actually took place. Whatever the purpose of his role: for war to be an experience of happiness, it has to be a war that was not a war. It has to be an experience that is other than that of a war, as if the war could be experienced apart from the war that was taking place and in a way that did not have to be thought of as war. Well of course there were these experiences. What seems to be problematic here is that there is a vale cast over the larger picture of what was actually taking place, and experience that cannot possible be told but about which it would be a deception to creation the contrary illusion of what was actually taking place. This said, if the interviewee had been asked the question, what was his experience of the war, he might have revealed a completely different experience from that which made it possible to say that it was the time when he was most happy.

³ This city could have been one of many cities that had been largely destroyed during the events of those most recent of times. The city was Wroclaw, also previously known as Breslau, was 70% destroyed as a result of this war.

The difficulty of the above situation, irrespective of the limited information that we are working with, is the fact that it is not clear what the language being used actually refers to; whether it refers to an isolated experience or a general experience. The war could be an event or it could refer to a period of time in which the event took place, such that it is possible to conceive of happiness being an experience that was experienced worlds away from what was actually going on at the front. To the interviewee, the situation of where it is possible to be happy during a war might have been commensurable or the same situation might have been incommensurable – we don't know, but somehow, we believe we need philosophy.

Socrates and Callicles

This brings us to the question of which makes a situation and therefore how we might think in that context of a particular situation. We will return to the confusion of war later on. Now I want to turn to education as a domain of experience and move towards being able to explore the student-teacher interaction when conceptualized as a situation. In particular, I want to explore the role of philosophy as it is understood by Alain Badiou (2010) with respect to what makes a philosophical situation and how a philosophical situation, because of its nature, requires a response that is particular to the problem it defines. This analysis is going to lead me to making a provocation about the state of reason in education, from which I will assemble a description of situation in education that supposes, at least to me, the need that it be thought philosophically.

The purpose of Badiou's (2010) analysis of Plato's dialogue involving Socrates and Callicles in *Gorgias* (1979) is to illustrate how a particular type of situation, which Badiou calls a philosophical situation, cannot be treated in any other way than through making a choice. This choice not only comprises the need for a decision but also the need to commit to thinking through that which makes the situation a philosophical situation; which is to say, its incommensurability. Badiou describes this fundamental choice of thought as being a choice "between what is interested and what is disinterested" (p. 12). It is because of the "interested" that we are thinking that philosophy has a role and a purpose – to use someone else's words - in education. Furthermore, it is because of the implied confrontation that must ensue on account of there being different kinds of thinking – what interests and what doesn't interest – that we are drawn to associate this idea with our need to see what happens in education. Badiou's summary of the confrontation between Socrates and Callicles reads as follows:

This dialogue presents an extremely brutal encounter between Socrates and Callicles. This encounter creates a philosophical situation, which, moreover, is set out in an entirely theatrical fashion. Why? Because the thought of Socrates and that of Callicles share no common measure, they are totally foreign to one another. The discussion between Callicles and Socrates is written by Plato so as to make us understand what it means for there to be two different kinds of thought which, like the diagonal and the side of the square, remain incommensurable. This discussion amounts to a relation between two terms devoid of relation. Callicles argues that might is right, that the happy man is a tyrant – one who prevails over others through cunning and violence. Socrates on the contrary maintains that the true man, who is the same as the happy man, is

the Just, in the philosophical sense of the term. Between justice as violence and justice as thought there is no simple opposition, of the kind that could be dealt with by means of arguments covered by a common norm. There is a lack of any real relation. Therefore the discussion is not a discussion, it is a confrontation. And what becomes clear to any reader of the text is not that one interlocutor will convince the other, but that there will be a victor and a vanquished. This is after all what explains why Socrates' methods in this dialogue are hardly fairer than those of Callicles. Wanting the ends means wanting the means, and it is a matter of winning, especially winning in the eyes of the young men who witness the scene.

In the end, Callicles is defeated. He doesn't acknowledge defeat, but shuts up and remains in his corner. ... (pp. 3-4)⁴

Fundamental to Badiou's (2010) understanding of what makes a situation a philosophical situation is its incommensurability. If a situation is commensurable in that its subjects are able to function according to a single measure (something Socrates and Callicles were not able to do because justice what thought of according to different measures); that is, where an understanding of what makes up the situation can be achieved through a single kind of thinking, then there is no paradoxical relation, as Badiou calls it. In this instance, everything about the situation can be known and philosophical thinking has no role to play; that is at least in terms of how Badiou understands the role of philosophy thought. There are many situations in life where the nature of the situation is practical in the sense that its meaning cannot be altered through the interpretation of there being something else present when the finite and concrete character of the situation is already agreed upon. In such situations, if one breaks apart the components of what makes up the situation, all the pieces can be put back together again, restoring the integrity of the whole for reason that there continues to be a single measure governing the nature of their relationship. Curiously, in two of the three examples Badiou gives of philosophical situations, there are confrontations between two individuals; although in the case of Archimedes, it could be thought to involve a confrontation between the great man himself and the State, given that his murderer was a soldier and acting on orders of the head of the invading Roman force. What I mean to say here is that the question of what situation is commensurable and what situation is incommensurable would appear in many cases to rest on the complexity of the social relations that characterise it; a case in point being class of students in a tertiary institution. Here, either interpretation could be made, depending on, for instance, the subject taught, the social hierarchies at play, the level of theoretical enquiry applied and so on. In short though, we can say that the defining characteristics of a situation philosophical are, according to Badiou: (1) The presence of a paradox. If there is no paradox, there is nothing for philosophy to do. On the other hand, if situation contains a paradox, only philosophical thought will be capable of addressing the significance of its presence. (2) The existence of a relation between the protagonists of the situation that is not a relation i.e., that despite the existence of the relation, there is something that negates the relation. (3) The distinction between politics and philosophy. Badiou is insistent that politics must not be mistaken for philosophy.

⁴ Badiou also describes two other forms of philosophical situation: the philosophical situation that exists on account of there being a conflict between power and truth, and the philosophical situation that exists on account of their being the need to make a break against that which governs conservative interests (see 2010, pp. 5-12).

Without further a due, I am going to turn to my provocation. My intention is to speak to what concerns me when I think about the state of reason in education, the aim being to explicate these concerns without guidance of what the situation should comprise. What is important here is the capturing of a reality, just as the words of the interviewee in the radio interview depicted a certain ambiguous complexity of elements and their tension that can only be expressed when expressed accurately when there is something of a rebellion that comes from the historical emotional that are associated with their enduring lack of expression. When all is said and done, I will explore the value of Badiou's (2010) model of the philosophical situation.

Provocation

Turning to the question of how a profane term, experience or a gesture may be used to interpret the state of reason in education, I am going to make a series of statements, which I believe should have major implications for how we understand undergraduate study that supposes the employment of theoretical thinking in programmes taken in the Humanities, something that should have particular relevance for future developments in teacher-training programs (involving the possible discarding of the undergraduate teacher training degree). I believe it is now difficult to provide assurance that the New Zealand Qualification Assurance 'Bachelor's Degree Outcomes' (NZQA, 2012) are being adequately met. It appears evident to me, as someone who has taught and marked across four tertiary institutions during the last ten years, that the focus of Government policy, since 1987, with respect to ascribing an explicit economic purpose to education (see The Treasury, 1987) has overridden the estimable academic intentions that these level 7 outcomes allude to. In short, what I am saying is that there is a self-contradiction between intentions and requirements. More specifically, I am saying that I don't believe that the level 7 requirements are being met in three criteria: demonstrate intellectual independence, critical thinking and analytic rigour⁵. While the empirical research could be done to demonstrate such a fact, what I am in search of here is *how* these outcomes, as attributes, are thought of when their acquisition does not occur in the way that education might suppose they should. This is the experience I am referring to when I allude to the need to uncover the state of reason.

If the contemporary student has strategically positioned the assessment task as the fundamental exercise through which they should achieve their qualification, as I believe is the case in undergraduate programmes – something that does not bode well for the quality of postgraduate research – then learning in the subject area can be said to have become secondary and, as such, only relevant when the assessment task requires effort to be applied to understanding the minimum requirements of the task itself. Passing and qualifying is what is important. You might argue, and rightly so, that this has always been the case; that there is nothing new here. The danger is that this summation of the situation disguises the nature of the changes that have taken place in the way that the student has come to constitute him or herself since the late 1980s, during which time we have seen a gradual change in what it means to perform academically. I think the change in student understanding of what academic performance is borne out by: (1) the primacy given by the student to their question: 'what do I need to know to pass?'; (2) the overriding importance given to

⁵ This paper will not look at the other Outcomes set for the Bachelor Degree as this would extend the discussion beyond the scope of this paper.

the teaching moment where the objective is to prepare the student for the assessment task, whatever the mode of teaching; and (3) the difficulty students have in interpreting marking when feedback requires the student to rethink their understanding of the concepts and questions that the subject area supposes a fundamental familiarity with⁶. If this is concerning in itself, then this is only half the story one needs to hear! The fact is that if we understand correctly the intentions of neo-liberal ideology with respect to the ideals it holds for education⁷, the student's schema for achieving a qualification functions in a manner that would appear to be faithful to its original design. This is to say, if tertiary institutions are preparing students for jobs that have not yet been identified, in terms of what these jobs entail as an experience then it is perfectly logical for present course content and future work experience not to bare any resemblance to one another. In light of this absence of a formative education that has as its purpose, in the understanding of the student, the objective of preparing the student for a career that reflects in nature their choice of study, the student would appear to overcome the irrational nature of this situation through acquiring a capacity to be performative in their assembly of a response to the assessment task and in doing this, through understanding that this exercise in itself does not necessarily require knowledge of that which the assessment supposedly to examine. The connection between learning and work is made in another way, which is to say through being able to perform in relation to what one does not know or, put more explicitly, through being able to perform in relation to what one decides one does not need to know; *need* here needing to be interpreted as meaning *want*; these two concepts having been already inculcated in the mind of the student through their experience as a consumer (see Anderson, 1993)⁸. The point of transforming the tertiary institution into an economic enterprise and, in doing so, so directly connecting education in the Humanities as a formative process to the activity of work – entry to which is gained through one's graduation – is not the acquisition of knowledge. Rather, it is the acquisition of a capacity to meet a deadline in such a manner that the absence of what might otherwise be regarded as relevant knowledge is not made to appear absent because it is via this experience that the student must be able to constitute him or herself as someone who can be coerced without resistance and at the convenient of the moment when future unknown events require them to be implicated. The name of the mission is yet to be named! This results in the formation of an individual who must understand the requirements of acting, well at least in part but someone who does not call him or herself an actor. This individual is one whose possibilities are defined by their adaptability to the hitherto unseen requirements of future tasks; that is, not by what the subject believes they should know in those future circumstances. I would suggest that we are now in a situation where it could be understood that it is assessment *without* course knowledge that capacitates the student in their preparation for work rather than assessment *of* course knowledge, for reason being that future work will most likely to be thought of as a form of *assessment without knowledge*.

⁶ There are other factors to consider too, for example (1) the cost of study and therefore the cost of possibly having to repeat the course if there is a fail grade awarded; (2) the presumption that a course purchased presuming the realization of a commercial contract: fees paid = at minimum a pass grade (or fees paid = pass purchased); (3) the presumption that one would have to do very badly to fail and therefore one is unlikely to fail – this presumption is supported in theory by tertiary institutions insisting that fail rates must fall under a certain percentage, something that is obviously done in order to protect (or raise) the institution's status on the international ranking's ladder; and so on.

⁷ See, for example, Robinson and Dale (1999), for a critical study of the impact of neoliberalism on education in New Zealand since the late 1980s.

⁸ For a critique of the creation of the student as an autonomous choose, see Marshall, J. D. (1996).

The possibility that 'assessment of course knowledge' has been made obsolete by students who understand their task to be 'assessment without course knowledge' supposes a strange situation for he who attempts to theorize what might be happening in education, in general, and in the interaction between the student and teacher, in particular. Within this very specific idea of a transformation from one reality to another, education has become other than what we previously and possibly still understand it to be. What I am saying is that this transformation is in some way inorganic: just as there is a self-contradiction in the relationship of State intentions and State requirements, with respect to how outcomes should be achieved, there is a self-contradiction in the classroom that is even more difficult to reveal for what it is. Education is what it is and education is something else that it is not making itself explicit. I am not referring to the unfaithful realisation of an ideal, as for instance when the curriculum is not understood in spirit and as the framework it should be understood as, but rather I am referring to the need to gain a clearer picture of what seems to be both significant and ambiguous. For these reasons, I have decided to rename the nature of what tasks place in the domain of human activity we call education. In short, I will approach what I believe is taking place in this social interaction as if it were theatre – not education, but theatre. The concept of the theatre will be the diagnostic tool that I will use to construct an idea of the situation that students and teachers find themselves in today.

Theatre, if it speaks of the world!

What is theatre? (Not education). Theatre, in the form that we might expect to experience in the classroom or lecture theatre could be thought of as an ambiguous experience of what Hannah Arendt (1998) calls the human condition. I have called this ambiguous experience because the human activity of *action*, in the context of what takes place in the contemporary classroom, becomes subjugated to the interests prescribe the value of the human activity of *work*. We should say here that while Arendt does not address her thinking on the human condition with respect to its implications for how we should understand what is taking place in education, the transformation of education into an economic enterprise does suggest the possible value of such an exploration.

The cast in this drama is as follows: students (visible), teacher/lecturer (visible), institution and State (invisible) and family (invisible). The audience at this drama is free enterprise (invisible). All actors perform for the later; the student's performance providing the only visible evidence of the symbolism of their experience. All other relations are discrete and in effect disguised by the manner in which the teacher/lecturer governs relations in the classroom. This visibility and invisibility is important to understanding of the dynamic that governs the drama; all entities are in fact actors of significance, irrespective of their degree of visibility or invisibility. For instance, the invisible nature of the Institution's and State's governance is crucial to how we should understand the student's comprehension of what it is to think independently. If the teacher does not exercise any political subjectivity capable of challenging their relations with the Institution, the student's actions can be said to be governed through teacher's agency and by the Institution; a situation that turns the student into a shadow player. In these circumstances, there is what Badiou (2010, p. 14) calls a "relation that is not a relation" between the student and the Institution.

How should we understand the power relations between the actors who are visible and those who are not? The visible actors are subjects of the invisible actors according to a division of roles with

respect to how action has come to be understood. This later idea is nothing new. According to Arendt (1998, p. 223), "Plato was the first to introduce a division between those who know and do not act and those who act and do not know, instead of the old articulation of action into beginning and achieving, so that knowing what to do and doing it became two altogether different performances". In effect, the actor who initiates the action then delegates the execution of that action to another actor. What are the implications for this division of roles when we examine what is taking place in the classroom? In the present paradigm, where the teacher is required to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge rather than transmit it and students are thought of as being more performative when participating in learning communities, the teacher's role sits more simply with Plato's division of roles than does the student's. The teacher would initiate the action and there would be little cause for debate over the relevance of delegating the execution of an action to the student – well, at least when our observation of what is going on is assessed on a superficial plain. If, however, as Arendt says, the principle of beginning is intimately tied to the principle of freedom, in the above circumstances, this freedom would disappear from the student's experience of their education. When confronted with this idea, you might venture the opinion that, in a learning community, it would be expected that students would initiate new actions, but this itself is a prescription of freedom and, as such, cannot be thought to be received without first being prescribed.

Of course, this is an extremely simplistic explanation of how a student's protagonism can disappear from the narrative, of how the economic enterprise can override the process of governance within a class and turn what the teacher preconceived to be an interesting class into a series of tasks that become a form of work training. The philosophy and the politics of the teacher, and by implication the Institution and the State, are articulated as if they speak for the same interest. From the teacher's perspective it is possible to think of their relationship with the student as commensurable in that if the student passes or fails, understands or doesn't understand, enjoys the class or doesn't, it's all the same reason that the rule of authority lies with he or she who has control over what is initiated. The student's experience in these circumstances could be complete other than what the teacher understands them to be in that it is possible that there are two different kinds of thinking at play, that there is a battle going on that the teacher is unaware of. If the student has not been taken in by the ethos of work that has overridden the more complex interests of education, the student is quite likely making a choice, and thinking the paradox of their situation. Such a situation requires the student to separate the philosophical from the political. The political thought is to accept the requirement of achievement and in this respect the student is compliant, but only in name; that is, they accept to do the assessment task. However, the manner in which the student understands their freedom outside of fulfilling this task is informed by other ideas of how their time should be best spent. In these circumstances, the fate of the paradox would appear to move out of view of the teacher; that is, unless he or she himself was prepared to seek the paradox in their relations with those who they play with, with those who play them for who they are not.

The state of reason in education is not a single state; it is a condition that can only be thought when one realises that one is a stranger to the system that pretends to govern in full knowledge of the complexity of what our experience in education entails.

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